



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HARRY JONES

CTW junior sailors sailing Optimist sailboats on the Detroit River.

DETROIT'S CHALLENGE THE WIND PROGRAM ADJUSTS ITS SAILS

By Melissa Walsh

Sailors know that you can't change the wind, but you can adjust your sails—a lesson that translates to navigating through the shifting winds of life. In 2020, caught in the force of a global pandemic, each of us learned how to adjust.

Detroit's Challenge the Wind (CTW) program is making plans for a post-pandemic refresh. The program was launched in 1994 at Grayhaven Sail Club—now at Belle Isle's Detroit Boat Club—with the mission to bring the love and lessons of sailing to kids "who otherwise may not get the opportunity." Over many sailing seasons, CTW met this mission and expanded the sailing experience among Detroit kids, significantly growing the program each year before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of its 2020 season.

Since 2018, when the program moved to Detroit Boat Club from Kean's Marina across the river, CTW benefitted from a safe river-bayside space for the kids and instructors. A room in the club's Belle Isle Boat House served as a classroom. CTW Director Harry Jones dubbed the

secluded waterway near the docks "Opti Bay." It's a calm space near the edge of the Detroit River where the kids can learn to sail and learn how to swim and get back into the boat safely if it capsizes.

"We started off 2020 with some great expectations," said Jones. "We had increased our capacity up to 80 young people."

By the time the leadership determined it must cancel sessions for 2020, the program was two-thirds full in early April. Although program activities would have been outdoors, Jones did not want to expose CTW junior sailors and instructors any further to the risk of spread of the virus, which spiked in Detroit that spring. According to Detroit Health Department data, by May 14, 2020, there were 10,164 COVID-19 cases and 1,236 deaths in the city of Detroit.

"It was heartbreaking to have to suspend registration," he added.

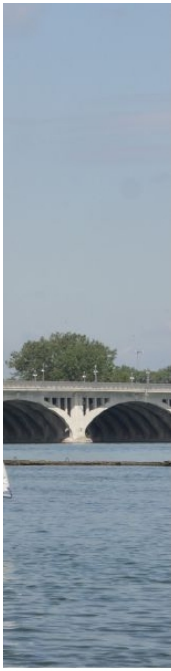
CTW leadership also suspended the plan it had worked out in January 2020 to launch the Detroit Community Sailing Center (DCSC), an after-work adult learn-to-sail program

using Flying Scots and the space and resources that CTW participants use during the day.

Nonetheless, volunteers made the most of the forced shutdown by getting to work on improving space and resources, preparing for the hopeful 2021 CTW reopening and launch of DCSC.

"What we were able to do was work on a lot of things we didn't have time to get around to doing," Jones said. "I had a great group of folks that volunteer on, what I call, our maintenance team. We did a lot of boat repairs. We repaired our floating docks, and, with the help of Grosse Pointe Yacht Club's Grosse Pointe Youth Nautical Education Foundation (GPYNEF) and some of our own money, we were able to redo over 700 square feet of dock decking, which will work well for us this year because it will allow us to spread our participants out more."

In addition, to mitigate rising-water issues, the Friends of Detroit Rowing repaired seawalls and installed pumps and sandbags, protecting the boathouse and riverside gathering space for the sailors and Detroit Boat Club rowers.



Hastings Lewis (on the helm) and Ella Harvey celebrate placing first in their first 420 sailboat race.

Over the past several years, CTW benefited from the donations and volunteers of GPYNEF. The GPYNEF commissioned professional carpenters to restore a total of 1,296 of dock decking; donated Optimist dinghies, 420s, and a Tartan 10 to the program; provided grant funding; and set up floating platforms to ease dinghy access to the bay in the Detroit River used to teach the kids how to sail. In 2019, the GPYNEF managed the installation of a replacement throttle, engine control, steering system, fuel tank, batteries, and battery box for CTW's decades-old 17-foot Carolina Skiff, courtesy of Tom Ragusa of Sun Sport Marina in Harrison Township.

In 2020, the CTW program had been gaining momentum in networking, not only with Grosse Pointe Yacht Club's junior sailing program and resources for racing clinics but also making plans to participate in neighboring junior sailing activities on the Detroit River at Detroit Yacht Club and Bayview Yacht Club. Jones says he's looking forward to pursuing these 2020 plans in 2021.

For its 2021 volunteer pool, CTW seeks US Sailing-Certified instructors

and volunteer instructors with a strong sailing background. The program is also recruiting volunteers who simply enjoy being by the water and around young people. With this season's added COVID-19 challenges, Jones said he's also "looking for volunteers that will help us come up with COVID-19 procedures that we want to put in place."

"We'd like to have some volunteers that are extremely mindful of what those protocols are and can help us maintain the safety of our participants, as well as our instructors," said Jones.

In addition to volunteers, the club's wishlist includes a monetary donation of any amount; Opti dinghy sails; 420 dinghy hardware, spinnakers, and sails; handheld radios; *Learn Sailing Right* Beginning and Intermediate textbooks; and Danforth style eight-pound anchors.

Both the CTW and DCSC programs are designed to provide the opportunity to grow sailing skills and sailing confidence that can only be cultivated over time on the water and working as part of a team.

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Above: CTW junior sailors, instructors, and junior instructors ready to go sailing.
Below: CTW sailors getting ready to rig and sail Optimist dinghies.



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The CTW 2021 Youth Program is \$100 per two-week segment. With the help of volunteers, US Sailing-certified instructors will lead two beginner, intermediate, and assistant-instructor level sessions per day. Added to this year's program is power-boat training to prepare experienced participants to become assistant instructors.

The DCSC 2021 Adult Program will offer entry-level instruction to adults with little to no sailing experience, including lessons in sailing basics, water safety, learning the boat's parts, and how to rig and steer the boat. The program also will help participants find opportunities for gaining hands-on sail-racing experience.

"We're looking forward to having a great year," Jones said.

To learn more about CTW and DCSC, visit www.detroitcsc.org or contact program administrators at info@detroitcsc.org or (313) 473-7793.

RESOURCES:

Challenge the Wind program
www.challengethewind.org

Challenge the Wind wishlist
www.challengethewind.org/wishlist.html

Detroit Boat Club
<https://detroitboatclub.clubexpress.com>

Detroit Community Sailing Center
www.detroitcsc.org

Friends of Detroit Rowing
www.detroitboatclubcrew.com

Grosse Pointe Youth Nautical Education Foundation
www.gpynef.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Walsh was raised on the shores of the heart-shaped lake nestled between the St. Clair and Detroit rivers that pumps the lifeblood of water recreation and the "blue economy" in Southeast Michigan. She's enjoyed learning to navigate the shallow depths and sail the shifty winds of Lake St. Clair. So naturally, as a freelance journalist and boat broker in Detroit, Walsh delights in writing about power boating and sailing.



Rigged Optimist dinghies ready for CTW junior sailors to sail in "Opti Bay."

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